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Federally-funded researchers have significantly increased understanding of the health status of Gulf War veterans in the past year, according to the report of a government scientific panel. The federal research commitment in this area has now reached \$115 million in support of 121 research projects, according to an annual report to Congress by the interagency Persian Gulf Veterans Coordinating Board's Research Working Group.

The Coordinating Board, composed of the secretaries of the Departments of Defense, Health and Human Services and Veterans Affairs, was established by President Clinton in January 1994 to respond to the health problems of Gulf War veterans. Its working groups coordinate the federal response to Gulf War veterans' needs in clinical care, compensation, research and other program areas.

The Research Working Group noted in its annual report for 1997 that more than half of the 121 projects involve scientists outside of the government. It said 39 of the 121 projects have been completed, 78 are ongoing and four have been awarded funds that are pending startup. Because of the complexity of the issues, the report's assessment of newly completed studies -- along with preliminary findings reported from ongoing work -- does not offer simplistic conclusions, noting that these findings are gradually building a body of knowledge about the health of Gulf War veterans and potential risk factors that concern them.

Among findings cited in the report are:

- Two studies on reproductive health indicate that the occurrence of birth defects may not be greater in the offspring of Gulf War veterans compared to their non-deployed counterparts.
- The first study of women Gulf War veterans using a survey questionnaire shows that they report some specific health problems at a greater rate than women in the military who were not deployed to the Gulf. Based on questionnaire data, both groups of women had higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder than would be expected based on previous studies of mostly male veterans.
- Studies focusing on neuropsychological performance, psychological health and symptoms also have reported that not all health symptoms may be explained by psychological distress.
- Preliminary results from ongoing follow-up continue to show results similar to early reports that disease-specific deaths do not occur at any greater frequency in Gulf veterans than among non-deployed counterparts.

The report observed that approximately one-third of the federally supported research portfolio is devoted to epidemiological research, another third to clinical research, and the remainder to basic research and vaccine and drug development.

The proportion of projects funded in epidemiologic research has declined while the number of studies concerning the health effects of exposure to chemical warfare agents has markedly increased. The report noted there has been a relatively greater increase over the years of research on chemical interactions,

chemical warfare agents and pyridostigmine bromide.

This year, according to the report, new research is focusing on treatment of Gulf War veterans, with VA and DoD investing as much as \$10 million in what may become the single largest treatment trial of chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia. Two new projects funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will add to studies of the characteristics of ill Gulf War veterans and to developing a case definition of illness.

Veterans with concerns about their health or exposures in the Persian Gulf may get information and referrals for protocol medical examinations via toll-free numbers. For those who remain on active-duty today, the Department of Defense operates a hotline at 800-796-9699, while those who have left active duty, including deactivated reservists or National Guard members, may receive assistance from VA at 800-749-8387. The military also staffs an incident reporting hotline at 800-472-6719 where individuals may report information they believe is pertinent to investigations of events that may have bearing on the health of Gulf War veterans.

The 1997 annual report is available on the Internet at <http://www.va.gov/resdev/PGRpt97.htm>